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ABSTRACT

Background information is presented on components and practices in adult English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) literacy programs. In Part I, Characteristics of ESL Literacy Programs, answers are given to questions covering definitions of an ESL literacy program, who the students are, goals of ESL literacy programs, and types of literacy programs eligible for nomination in the National English Literacy Demonstration Program for Adults of Limited English Proficiency. Part II of this paper outlines components that research has shown to be effective parts of adult literacy programs: community outreach, needs assessment, program design, curriculum, approaches and methods, initial assessment and progress evaluation, staff development, and support services. Examples of each are given. Part III illustrates types of evidence of program effectiveness, including progress in literacy development (e.g. student writings, test scores, anecdotal evidence) and evidence of outcomes that can be linked to literacy education (e.g. transfer to mainstream programs, greater use of community services, increased confidence and participation). (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (LB)

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Background Information:

A Look at Program Components and Innovative Practices in Adult ESL Literacy

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PART I: CHARACTERISTICS OF ESL LITERACY PROGRAMS

1. What is an ESL Literacy Program?

ESL literacy programs are programs (or sections of programs) that put a special emphasis on developing the literacy skills (reading, writing, and cognitive development) of adults who have limited proficiency in English. Beginning literacy skills may be developed either in English or in the native language. The primary focus of ESL literacy programs is on enabling students to use literacy effectively in their lives (e.g., to read with their children, to understand notices and signs, and to write down their thoughts and ideas). Typically, ESL literacy programs also include an oral language component to help learners develop their overall proficiency in English.

2. Who are the students in ESL literacy programs?

ESL literacy programs typically serve adults who want or need to develop their reading, writing, and cognitive skills and who may need special support before they can succeed in a formal learning environment.

Among the ESL students served are learners who

* have not yet learned to read and write in English although they have some proficiency in spoken English and may have developed excellent functional "survival skills."

* tend to have few years of formal schooling and may be reluctant to re-enter conventional schools.

* have had limited opportunities to acquire literacy in their home countries and thus may not be literate in their native language. Some learners may have strong coping skills and a social network that allows them to function quite well without much knowledge of print.

To a lesser extent, ESL literacy programs also serve students who

* have received several years of formal education in their home countries but have had little experience using the Roman alphabet.

* are able to understand most spoken English and communicate face to face quite well but need additional opportunities to develop their reading and writing skills.

3. **What are the goals of ESL literacy programs?**

ESL literacy programs tend to share a common purpose: enabling learners with limited English proficiency to use literacy in order to achieve certain goals. These goals may include:

* becoming more proficient in oral and written English
* becoming literate in their native language
* gaining greater independence in reading and writing
* integrating additional literacy practices into their daily lives
* achieving greater educational or occupational success
* accessing community services and/or mainstream educational programs
* coping with daily life situations or workplace tasks
* establishing or maintaining the literacy traditions of their culture
* using literacy to reflect on the circumstances of their lives and to effect both personal and social change
* interacting across generations through literacy

4. **What kind of literacy program can be nominated?**

Nominated programs may include any ESL literacy program that (1) serves Limited English Proficient (LEP) adults, (2) integrates literacy with oral language development, and (3) puts **a special emphasis on teaching reading and writing in context.** We are primarily interested in programs that offer literacy education at the lower levels (i.e., initial literacy for non-readers and beginning literacy for those who have not yet learned to read and write independently). ESL workplace literacy programs may still be eligible even if they have students at slightly higher levels.

We are seeking nominations in several areas: programs that appear **exemplary overall** with respect to serving the literacy needs of LEP adults, or programs that exhibit **several strong components** (e.g.,community outreach, curriculum, support services), and/or programs that are instituting **innovative practices** in ESL literacy although they may not be outstanding in all areas. Upon request, programs should be able to provide some evidence that demonstrates that they have been successful in enabling ESL learners to achieve their literacy goals. (See the following pages for discussions of program components, innovation, and effectiveness.)

PART II: PROGRAM STRENGTHS AND INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

Research has shown that effective adult literacy programs tend to be strong in the following components: (1) community outreach, (2) needs assessment, (3) program design, (4) curriculum, (5) approaches and methods, (6) initial assessment and progress evaluation, (7) staff development, and (8) support services.

The following examples illustrate what we consider strong program components and/or innovative practices:

1. Community Outreach

Strong community outreach includes efforts to represent the program in culturally appropriate ways to the community of the learners, to reduce barriers to participation, and to facilitate access to the program. Such outreach also encompasses linkages with social service agencies, employers, other educational institutions, and vocational or training programs.

> **Examples of Innovation:** Innovative efforts might include various ways of generating interest in the literacy program, such as asking members of the learners' community to visit neighborhood churches and synagogues, clinics, housing projects, schools, union halls, and other centers where adults may gather. Innovative outreach may also provide literacy education at sites where adults live or work, e.g., through home tutoring or mobile literacy classrooms.

2. Needs Assessment

A strong needs assessment helps identify both the needs of the larger community and the literacy goals of the individual learners. Such a needs assessment includes information on the changes taking place in the community (demographics, employment opportunities, and emerging social and political issues), as well as information about the educational, language, and cultural backgrounds of the learners. A needs assessments can also include ongoing efforts to help learners articulate their aims and assist them in setting realistic goals with respect to literacy.

> **Examples of Innovation:** An innovative needs assessment calls for active involvement of the learners, teachers, and community leaders in planning and implementing the program. It could include periodic group sessions with the learners to discuss not only their immediate literacy needs but also their progress toward long-term goals. In workplace programs, such an assessment would involve workers, teachers, supervisors, and managers in discussing literacy practices at the work site, needs of the company, and goals of individual workers.

3. **Program Design**

A strong program design clearly articulates the goals of the program in terms of literacy and links all components to these goals. Such a design should contain enough flexibility to allow the program to respond to the changing literacy needs of students. A program that has a mandated curriculum should show how it negotiates between the requirements of the funding source (e.g.,achievement of competencies) and the special literacy needs and goals of the learners.

Examples of Innovation: An innovative program design might be based on a working definition of literacy developed through collaborative efforts. All major aspects of the program would reflect both the educational philosophy and the goals of the program. Innovative designs include those in which a committee of student or worker delegates participate in collective problem solving and policy making. Such a design might also explicitly link community resources with the curriculum.

Innovative efforts may include native language support in significant aspects of the program (e.g., teaching initial literacy in the first language, using a bilingual approach in teaching English literacy, or employing bilingual aides to facilitate collaboration between teachers and students).

4. **Curriculum**

A strong curriculum acts as a conceptual framework that (1) outlines the kinds of literacy the program wants to emphasize (e.g.,prose literacy, document literacy, functional literacy); (2) suggests approaches, methods, and materials; and (3) links classroom teaching at the various levels with assessment and evaluation. Within the agreed-upon framework for literacy education, there should be flexibility to allow for a variety of approaches that can respond to differing student needs and varying teacher preferences.

Examples of Innovation: Innovative efforts may include ways of focusing on the cognitive and creative aspects of literacy or developing an emphasis on the relationship between literacy and the socio-cultural context of students' lives. Innovation may also include the following: (1) integrating task-based or competency-based literacy with prose literacy, (2) enabling students to maintain the literacy traditions of their community, (3) using content information to increase the learners' background knowledge, and (4) emphasizing reading and writing strategies, not just skills. Innovative curricula in the workplace might combine task-based literacy with activities that foster "learning how to learn," include discussion of workers' rights, and provide opportunities for learners to work towards more personal literacy goals.

5. Approaches and Methods

Strong ESL literacy approaches and methods focus primarily on literacy use in both reading and writing (not just reading or writing practice) and reflect current knowledge of how adults with limited proficiency in English can learn to read and write while continuing to develop their oral skills.

Educational materials should familiarize learners with the various forms, functions, and uses of literacy. Activities and texts should validate and reflect the experiences and literacy practices of the learners and at the same time help them to connect their personal stories to the experiences and literacy practices of others.

> **Examples of Innovation:** Innovative approaches and methods might include having students read, write, and "publish" complete texts such as simple class newspapers, stories, or letters to people outside of the classroom. Students could work in teams to gather written information on topics of interest to them (e.g., AIDS, crime protection, bilingual hotlines, tenant rights) and to share their findings with others. At the very beginning levels (initial literacy), innovative approaches might start with environmental print activities, such as working with captioned pictures, labels, posters, and signs familiar to students.
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> At the workplace, innovative approaches might include strategies for coping with new technology at work, at home, and in the community (e.g., how to interpret phone bills, program a VCR, or use an automated phone system).

6. Initial Assessment and Progress Evaluation

A strong initial assessment (diagnostic testing) helps determine what learners can and cannot do with respect to reading and writing. The assessment should show (1) how familiar students are with literacy in their native language, (2) how strong they are in English literacy, and (3) how well they can understand and express themselves in spoken English. Progress evaluation of students should provide evidence of student literacy gains as witnessed by teachers and experienced by the learners and should be capable of providing information requested by funding sources and other "stakeholders."

> **Examples of Innovation:** Innovative assessments may involve practices such as: (1) creative ways of combining mandated tests with program-based assessments; (2) guidelines, evaluation forms, and materials that allow teachers and counselors to assess the literacy skills and educational background of learners in a systematic way; and (3) a framework for having learners decide what they want to read and write to demonstrate their literacy skills. Innovative progress evaluations may also include observation guides that help teachers document qualitative changes in students' literacy behavior.

7. **Staff Development**

Strong staff development efforts foster collaboration among the staff and help teachers, tutors, and aides to expand their instructional repertoire. It can encourage teachers to reflect on the way they teach and to seek input from peers and other professionals. Strong staff development efforts also seek to build on the rich and varied experiences of staff members and teachers, especially those who come from the learners' community, and provide teachers with access to a wider network of ideas and practices.

> **Examples of Innovation:** Innovative staff development efforts may include incentives or release time for teachers who want to develop lessons and create literacy materials that better meet the needs of students. In some instances, innovative staff development might mean helping teachers and tutors to move beyond old perceptions and adopt new strategies for teaching reading and writing to LEP adults. In general, innovative staff development regards literacy teachers as professional educators and supports and rewards their efforts accordingly.

8. **Support Services**

Strong support services help reduce barriers to program participation. They may include services such as bilingual assistance, child care and/or transportation stipends, personal and educational counseling, and referrals to community resources. In the case of workplace literacy projects, strong support services may be evidenced by paid release time from work or incentives for participating in the program.

> **Examples of Innovation:** Innovative support services may include linkages with community organizations that will provide services and information onsite (e.g., vision screening, legal advice, or AIDS counseling). It may also involve outreach workers from the community who will be available to interpret and translate important documents for learners and bilingual aides who can facilitate communication with various bureaucratic agencies.

PART III: EVIDENCE OF EFFECTIVENESS

ESL literacy programs differ in the way they demonstrate that they are successful in enabling learners to reach their literacy goals. The following constitute some ways in which programs provide evidence of effectiveness.

1. **Evidence of progress in literacy development**

   * **Student writings** that demonstrate progress in using the written language to express thoughts and ideas (e.g., written pieces may be longer, exhibit greater ease and fluency, or show more complex structures and more sophisticated vocabulary). There may also be changes in text form, structure, and mechanics, such as letters that are formed with greater ease, more careful spelling, a closer approximation to standard English grammar, the use of titles, and the inclusion of pictures, drawings, or graphs to illustrate an idea.

   * **Formal classroom observations** that show changes in literacy behavior. For example, learners may read and write with greater ease, read more or read longer, use more effective reading and writing strategies (such as using context to predict meaning), link literacy to job tasks or life skills tasks, show greater independence in their approach to reading and writing, or use resources such as illustrations, charts, and graphs more frequently to assist them in comprehension.

   * **Informal observations or student self-assessments** that show that learners have greater confidence in reading and writing; are starting to use literacy outside of the classroom (e.g., in the family, in their community, or at work); demonstrate greater interest in literacy in general; or show greater awareness of the forms and functions of print.

   * **Comments from outside sources, such as union committees, supervisors, or school personnel working with parents** indicating that learners show greater interest in literacy at work or at school and that there is increased communication and collaboration between learners and others.

   * **Test scores or other quantitative data** that document growth in language and literacy in English and, to the extent possible, the native language.

   * **Anecdotal evidence** that demonstrates progress in language and literacy development both inside and outside of the classroom. Such information may come from the learners themselves, teachers, counselors, school personnel, co-workers, or others who work with the learners.

2. **Evidence of outcomes that can be linked to literacy education**

This evidence may show that learners

* transfer to mainstream ESL, vocational programs, or training programs.
* show increased interest in educational or occupational opportunities, in the schooling of their children, and in functions and activities at work.
* make greater use of community services.
* return to the program as teachers, community outreach workers, or bilingual aides.
* seek to gain control over their lives and make significant contributions to their communities.
* are more promotable or qualify for further education and training.
* have greater confidence in their ability to understand and use literacy, communicate their ideas, solve problems, work with others, and effect change.
* are more confident and participate more often in group discussions about problem solving.
* have developed skills and strategies that will take them beyond the limits of the program.